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Exploiting local controversy:

Regional British censorship of *Last Tango in Paris* (1972)

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This article explores local authority responses to the cinematic release of Last Tango in Paris in Britain. Using a range of archival material from the BBFC, the National Archives and the Public Records Office of Northern Ireland it offers a detailed, comparative case study of three different locations; Belfast, Newport and Oxford. It argues that comparing local censorship decisions with the national decisions of the BBFC offer little in the way of regional nuance. In order to effectively understand the workings of local censorship a deeper understanding of local discourses is needed as well as acknowledgement of broader pressure group activity and its impact on the local picture, such as that of the National Festival of Light.

The recent surge of renewed interest in film censorship, due in part to the opening up of the British Board of Film Classification's archives, has led to increased understanding of the workings of the BBFC and expanded debates about permission and taboo and the historical regulation of moving image in Britain.¹ Exploring their own archives allows for a more nuanced picture of the BBFC as an organization to emerge: specifically it indicates the BBFC's decision-making process and responses to particular films, as well as their desire to engage with its audiences and stakeholders. However, the ways in which

decisions about film censorship played out in different regions is harder to explore, as the local picture is often far more specific to the local area.

Local debates about film and cinema need to be understood within the framework of power relationships and censorship, suggested by Annette Kuhn, but also acknowledge that regionality and local discourses are a crucial way of understanding responses to film and cinema.² As work undertaken on historical cinema-going has indicated, responses to cinema are shaped by class, taste and location. Sue Harper's work on the Regent cinema in 1930s Portsmouth focuses on the financial records of this specific cinema and explores how the data can be used to indicate patterns of taste within cinema-going concluding that this particular cinema catered to the needs of a 'lower middle-class taste community.'³ However, Harper also cautions against typifying the findings; she instead draws attention to the exceptional nature of the evidence stating 'in order to get the full picture of Portsmouth's film going habits, we would need comparable admissions figures for all the cinemas and these do not exist.'⁴ Therefore the Regent cinema and its films are indicative of particular local tastes, but they in no way represent the tastes of the city and community as a whole and the full local picture is far more complex.

Precisely the same arguments can be applied to explorations of film controversy in local areas. Watch committee minutes which detail the decisions made by councils on contentious films can be an exciting and revealing source of information. Similarly council minutes, letters from members of the public, and policy documents produced by councilors all offer particularly local insights. All of this evidence highlights the way in which decisions are taken and hint at the factors which influence or inform this local decision-making process. But none of this can be considered typical; each locality is separate and individual and while there may be similar debates taking place in different locations, the availability of evidence may prevent direct comparisons from being drawn.

The purpose of this work is to both acknowledge the individuality of these locations and the unevenness of the historical evidence, but at the same time to offer some kind of comparison by considering regional responses to a particular

film. Using Bernardo Bertolucci's *Last Tango in Paris* (1972), this work considers responses to the film in the communities of Belfast in Northern Ireland, the University city of Oxford and Newport in South Wales. Focusing on a single film within different locations seeks to illuminate and explore local difference rather than to argue for a binary of national verses local censorship. It will allow for a consideration of the factors which shape local censorship and explore the distinctive social-economic composition of particular areas.

The overarching purpose of this article is to consider the ways in which local communities responded to this film. This is not to say that the national discussions around the film are not important, but rather that they are not the focus here. James Robertson's invaluable work on the national controversy around *Last Tango in Paris*, as well as further information about the legal action brought against the film drawn from files at the National Archive will provide valuable additional context.⁵

The significance of the local

Existing work which explores British film censorship as part of local council activity frequently highlights film censorship debates covered in local newspapers, draws on the records of film viewing council committees, and of the relationship between the BBFC and local authorities. However, it rarely foregrounds the particular character of local regions and local discourses of culture and politics that shape responses to film censorship at local level. Mike Hally's excellent exploration of Sale and Manchester in northern England in the 1950s and 1960s examines the censorship activities of the two local committees and their decisions on a range of films.⁶ Hally identifies different kinds of films which were seen as troublesome by the two councils, paying particular attention to childbirth and sex education films and the films of the British New Wave. This last inclusion is particularly pertinent given the northern setting and locations utilised within this latter group of films. Hally's purpose is to draw attention to the activities of these local committees and to compare their decisions to those made by the London-based BBFC. Similarly, in an unpublished PhD thesis, Sian Lewis explores the framework of local censorship in the early 20th century and how this contrasts with the national picture, focusing on a historical period

rather than a geographical location.⁷

While both studies reveal a great deal about the processes of local film censorship and include some fascinating insights into the ways of working adopted by local councils, neither study explores the intricacies of local popular taste or to what extent local committees were making locally appropriate decisions. Hally quotes a former council member who suggests that opposition to films 'was largely moral, arising in some cases from strong religious convictions, and not party political at all.'⁸ While this may have been the case in 1950s Sale and Manchester, it would not have been the case elsewhere across the UK where evidence indicates that political affiliation did inform responses to cinema.

One of the most active local film committees of the early 1970s was Southend-on-Sea in Essex. A 1972 article in *CinemaTV Today* draws attention to the censorious activities of the film committee and to their political affiliations, identifying the committee's composition as comprising nine Conservatives, two Labour and one Liberal member.⁹ The X-rated films rejected by the council as unsuitable for exhibition in the local area included *Love Variations* (1971), *Straw Dogs* (1971), and *Beyond the Valley of the Dolls* (1970) while those passed for exhibition included *Soldier Blue* (1970), *Twins of Evil* (1971) and *Carnal Knowledge* (1971).

In Leeds in the same period, the decision to ban *A Clockwork Orange* (1971), fuelled in part by the well-meaning, but inept intervention of the BBFC, was reportedly only challenged 'by three socialists on the committee.'¹⁰ In both Leeds and Southend party politics is being cited as informing watch committee activity. While it is impossible to generalize and difficult to establish whether these political divisions were more noticeable in particular periods, around discussions of particular films, or were driven by personal and moral codes rather than party politics, it does indicate that politics *did* have a part to play in local censorship decisions and practices.

Furthermore in the uncertain political decade of the 1970s, competing discourses of class, gender and race provide a backdrop to the decade while the

shifts in national politics with lurches to political left and right characterize a fragmented, multi-layered and complex period. The activities of local councils and committees must be seen as part of these broader trends in a politicized decade where discussions about devolution and local power also play an important role. Cynthia Cockburn suggests that the period 1960 – 1974 was a time of ‘conscious reassessment of forms and styles of government.’¹¹ In the 1970s debates about decentralisation of power within the UK, with an emphasis on regionality start to emerge strongly as political issues. Much of this was due to the reorganisation of Britain through the Local Government Act of 1972. Cockburn notes that this legislation,

‘swept away the 1300 or more assorted English county, county borough, urban district and rural district councils that had served since the last century and replaced them with a uniform system of about 400 councils arranged into a two-tier system of counties and districts.’¹²

While this reshaped the local government map, it also created new localised centres of power. Arthur Marwick also notes that ‘In England and Wales smaller counties were grouped together and the conurbations were formally recognised as metropolitan counties.’¹³ Local areas were drawn into uneasy alliances with the creation of councils for ‘Greater Manchester’ West Midlands’ and ‘South Yorkshire.’ The regional was becoming more important, but the geographical areas included were becoming broader and less distinct.

Research into film licensing in Belfast has revealed that local politics and issues were at the forefront of debates about contentious films but that this debate was fuelled by a group with a national rather than a local agenda. The intervention by moral organisations, such as the Nationwide Festival of Light into these debates at national level has been noted, with James Robertson observing that with *Last Tango in Paris*, the Festival of Light and its allies ‘saw the film as a further important stage in a deterioration begun by earlier films and by theatre developments following the 1968 abolition of the Lord Chamberlain’s censorship.’¹⁴

The Nationwide Festival of Light were a Christian organization preoccupied with improving the moral health of Britain and acting against anything which sought to debase it. In the late 1960s and early 1970s the Festival began writing to all local councils to encourage local protests against specific films and attacks on the BBFC. There is no doubt that the Festival's campaign against *Last Tango in Paris* – and a number of others in this period - was carefully orchestrated, but the different regional responses uncovered indicates an uneven reaction to their tactics. Robertson has identified that the Festival of Light tactics of inciting local groups to protest to local councils was discernible across the country, and what appeared in Bristol to be spontaneous local religious protest was in fact 'part of the Festival's central orchestration.'¹⁵ The beleaguered Secretary of the BBFC in this period, Stephen Murphy, was well aware of these tactics. A government meeting between the BBFC and the Home Office about *A Clockwork Orange* (1971) recorded:

'He [Stephen Murphy] clearly regarded the treatment of this film by licensing authorities as something of a test case and he claims that the campaign against it by the Festival of Light and others was unscrupulous and misleading or at best, misinformed.'¹⁶

Murphy's antipathy to the Festival of Light and to Mary Whitehouse is well-known, yet the BBFC were fully aware that by targeting local authorities this moral and religious organization was able to exert significant pressure on one of the most anomalous parts of the system of British film censorship.

The existence of local censorship

Local film censorship in Britain operates on the basis that local authorities can overrule, challenge or uphold the recommended classification given to a film by the London-based BBFC and make their own ruling. This allows local authorities to make local decisions and decide that in cases where they feel the BBFC has been too lenient they can raise the classification, or refuse classification of the film altogether.¹⁷

The powers given to local authorities to operate in this way lie in two different

legislative anomalies. The first is the power granted to local authorities by the Cinematograph Act of 1909 which empowered local authorities to deny or allow the exhibition of films. This was mainly due to safety and licensing restrictions for new exhibition spaces but it has consistently and repeatedly been used by local councils to deny exhibition to films they find distasteful. By refusing an exhibition license for the exhibition of a particular film or making their displeasure known to local cinemas who exhibit controversial material and who depend on the local council for the renewal of their exhibition license, local committees wield a significant amount of power. The decision whether to wield this power or not is the prerogative of the individual committee, but the power to influence film exhibition and by extension, censorship of cinema, is a power available to all local authorities. These rights were confirmed in the Cinematograph Act of 1952 which declared that no film was to be exhibited if a licensing authority gives written notice prohibiting its exhibition.¹⁸

The second reason for the provision of powers to local authorities and city councils is that the BBFC is a non-statutory authority; in effect it recommends classifications for particular films, rather than officially and legally classifies them. While in practice the rule of the BBFC often goes unchallenged and many local authorities accept BBFC recommendations without demur, they are under no legal obligation to do so. In this way the legal power for film classification in Britain remains rooted in local authorities rather than the BBFC itself.

Unsurprisingly, the continued existence of this archaic and anachronistic system remains a politically hot topic. Even within the current BBFC guidelines, the organisation emphasizes that they 'classify films, trailers and advertisements on behalf of local authorities who license cinemas.'¹⁹ It also indicates that under the appeals process for films 'the customer (or any member of the public) may address itself to the local authority which licenses cinemas in a particular area.'²⁰ Despite the clarity of the published guidelines, it would be simplistic to presume that everyone at the Board, and indeed everyone within recent British governments, supports the rights of local authorities to retain their statutory powers. Yet the Board's public acceptance of the role of local authorities within this process fits in with their historical approach to contentious and potentially

divisive films.

There is plenty of evidence to indicate that the BBFC were happy to use certain films as test cases for local authorities, prior to considering national classification. In late 1969, the Swedish sex education film *The Language of Love* (1973) was denied a certificate by the BBFC who felt uneasy about classifying the film and so handed it over to local authorities to make their own decisions. After the film was passed by a number of local councils and had been supported publicly in the press by prominent individuals from the medical community, the BBFC finally certificated the film in 1973. The same tactics were adopted for the British-made *Love Variations* a number of years later.²¹ During the late 1960s and early 1970s, it was also common practice for the BBFC to test films using the local watch committee of the Greater London Council (GLC).

In 1973 when Enid Wistrich joined the Labour-controlled GLC she was surprised to note the existing of a Film Viewing Board whose specific functions were identified as: 'the viewing of films, the grant or refusal of consent for their exhibition, decisions as to the category of films, control of publicity for films, and matters related to the exhibition of films.'²² Wistrich later became the head of the viewing committee, partly because - as she recalled in her memoir - she was a woman and that anti-pornography crusaders were always asking 'Would you take your wife to see this film?' therefore it was deemed appropriate that she would head the committee. Decisions like this one - although presented as progressive - effectively indicate the extent to which the 1970s was a heavily politicized and uncertain decade, characterized by debates about gender, race and class as well as sexuality, taboo and permission.

In broader debates about censorship in the late 1960s which encompassed freedom of the press, theatre, television and film, this local authority power over film exhibition was actually perceived to be an important safeguard 'against an oppressive or misguided censor in London' thus highlighting the significance of the local to debates about permission and acceptability and the potential for local authorities to act as a counterbalance to the actions of the BBFC.²³

While powers of local censorship were available to all local authorities, many chose not to exercise their power and to instead abide by the decisions of the BBFC. At the end of the 1960s and as a knee-jerk reaction to an influx of films which appeared to push the boundaries of permission, some councils including Portsmouth, Southend and Belfast began to screen all X-certificated films and make their own decisions about exhibiting them locally. Such activity reveals how national debates about permission became much more localised and heavily grounded in the socio-political context of the specific area. Portsmouth abandoned this practice of viewing X-rated films following a visit from a senior BBFC examiner, who explained the processes of BBFC decision-making to an anxious committee. Local records document that following this visit the local watch committee became enthusiastic supporters of BBFC decisions.²⁴

Some councils were noticeably more tolerant than others. Oxford City Council was one of the first local councils to allow the screening of the un-certificated *Love Variations* in the city in 1970. Rejected by the BBFC in April 1970 and banned outright by numerous other local councils, Oxford passed the film for exhibition with their only stipulation being that it was treated as an X film. While even the liberally inclined GLC required that the film's publicity be controlled, Oxford required no such restrictions. The BBFC compiled a list of all the places where this particular film was permitted to be shown and this reveals a tendency towards Southern University cities and towns – Oxford, Cambridge, Brighton and Reading, with the film being banned outright in the Northern cities of Manchester, Liverpool, Glasgow, Cardiff, Leeds, Leicester and Sheffield. It is possible to see evidence of a north / south divide here – with the exception of the Birmingham which permitted the film to be shown without objections. This perhaps suggests that Birmingham possessed a liberal council, and made considered decisions to suit the needs of the local people. It is also significant that Birmingham University was home to the Centre for Cultural Studies which had been founded in 1964. While the example of Birmingham suggests how a myriad of cultural and social factors can combine to influence the decisions made by a local authority, further exploration would be necessary to consider other film decisions made by Birmingham city council in this period to help examine their liberal and local agenda.

This list collated by the BBFC indicates, albeit in a very uneven way, that while broad trends about cultural tolerance in specific places *can* be identified, frequently local influences and a range of socio-political factors specific to that geographical area can help determine the activities of a local authority. In a further challenge to the national verses local binary it is also important to remember that the BBFC were not unhappy with local councils exercising their local powers. Official notes from a government meeting in 1975 between members of the home office and Stephen Murphy and Lord Harlech of the BBFC reveal that the BBFC were:

‘Reasonably satisfied with the operation of the present system – most local authorities normally accepted the classification decisions made by the Board but quite rightly, in the light of local preferences, they occasionally reconsider films which had been certified by the Board or viewed ones which had been refused certification.’²⁵

This is of course a key issue; the ability for local authorities to make judgements on local issues and based on local preferences. But evidence gathered about film censorship in different locations has begun to indicate that often *the film itself* is not the object of contention but rather becomes the locus of debates about permission and taboo, which tap into other local discourses. As will be shown, very little of the material discovered in local collections and archives actually relates to the textual specificities of the film. I will now explore how different local regions responded to *Last Tango in Paris* and what this reveals about the nature of local censorship.

Case Study: Last Tango in Paris (1972)

The release of *Last Tango in Paris* across Europe promoted an anxious wait for the BBFC. Even before it had been officially submitted to the Board the British press passed judgement on the film. *The Evening News*’ Maurice Edelman dubbed it ‘a license to degrade’ while even experienced film critics like the *Evening Standard*’s Alexander Walker warned that ‘it would divide audiences in Britain in a way I think very few of us have been prepared for.’²⁶

Perhaps most interestingly, *The Guardian*'s Richard Roud suggested that the film would certainly cause a row because while the content was by no means extreme by early 1970s standards, the film was 'explicit without being pornographic and too important not to be shown.'²⁷ Here the significance of the film and of its director, are being directly cited as reasons why the film cannot be simply labeled as pornography or exploitation. Within the broad sweep of early 1970s film culture, *Last Tango in Paris* was perceived to be a high-quality successor to a film like *Women in Love* (1969) rather than the low-culture exploitation of *The Vampire Lovers* (1970). Characterizing films according to their 'quality' or artistic intent was a method frequently used by the BBFC in this period. Explicit material which was low-budget was exploitation; explicit material which was not was 'art.' These decisions were characteristic of BBFC activity in the period and affected the decisions made on work submitted by directors including Michael Winner, Ken Russell and Derek Jarman²⁸

In the case of *Last Tango in Paris*, James Robertson has drawn attention to the national debate around the film and the impact this had on its exhibition. Drawing on the work undertaken by James Robertson on the national debate around the film, I want to now consider reactions to the film in Belfast, Northern Ireland. The local response to this film from city residents and the local council highlights a number of essential issues, specifically the structures of power in the city, the operation of grass roots protest and the role which cinema and culture was playing in a divided city. At the end of the 1960s, the city of Belfast was suffering from the onset of 'The Troubles', and would be the site of violent protest and acts of terrorism for the next three decades. These divisions had their roots in religious and political opposition, and saw acts of atrocity committed by both sides throughout the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s.

As a direct result of this civil unrest, it is easy to imagine a local council completely absorbed by political and religious clashes, yet they still found time to wade in on the issue of film censorship. As a city Belfast was and is hugely conservative, and it places high value on family, church and society as key moderators of morality. Certainly by the late 1960s, the film committee, which

was constituted as part of the police committee, was regularly screening films given X certificates by the BBFC including tame fare such as Dudley Moore's *Bedazzled* (1967) and *Wild Angels* (1966). Despite conciliatory visits from BBFC general secretary John Trevelyan in 1968 and 1969, by late 1969 the council was considering an outright ban on the exhibition on all X-rated films in the city. This proposal prompted both cries of outrage and of support. One letter from a local student exclaimed:

'I would like to raise a voice in protest against the proposal which appears, to me and to many others, to be the ravings of a puritanical lunatic rather than the utterance from a body supposed to be safeguarding our morals. Having seen both of the X certificate films running, or about to run... *The Graduate* and *Romeo and Juliet* – I am staggered to think that anyone who has seen these films could treat them as anything other than a funny comedy and a superb presentation of Shakespeare's finest play.'²⁹

A local literary society also weighed in:

'More censorship in Belfast cinema will only kill the cinema in a city almost starved for culture and entertainment. We feel that our lives are controlled enough as it is without being told what to watch on a cinema screen. There exists in Northern Ireland a small minority (albeit a vociferous one) which tries to enforce a hypocritical narrow minded morality which the rest of the community does not want or need.'³⁰

There is evidence of a political sentiment here as well as dissatisfaction about the strong moral presence within the city. However, many local churches drawn from both sides of the religious divide voiced vociferous support for the proposal. The Eastside Church of Christ declared, 'we congratulate you for having the courage to act in the face of the opposition the forces of evil that would corrupt the morals of our youth under the guise of sophisticated art,' while the Cregagh Methodist Church agreed, considering; 'many of the X films being shown in our city constitute a danger to the moral life of our community.'³¹

Perhaps most frightening of these letters is an unsigned threat from a Protestant paramilitary group:

'If these pictures are banned in Belfast, we will burn out every member of the police committee. We know all their names and homes, we fought for Ulster's freedom. The people of Derry could not see any X pictures because the Pope-heads ruled the committee their (sic). We will make sure that the same thing does not happen here. If you are going to let the housewives of the Ormeau Road be the censors of the X pictures in Belfast, you are in for a big shock...watch your step, it will not be long till the dark nights.'³²

This explosive material shows that local censorship of cinema, while clearly a contentious issue in the city is tapping into a whole range of deeper contemporary issues - politics, religion, public morality.

The council abandoned their proposed X-rated ban, and as the new decade progressed and the BBFC continued to visit, the viewing committee grew more confident. The first discussions about *Last Tango in Paris* occurred in Belfast in May 1973 when the Nationwide Festival of Light wrote to the police committee. The film had been classified as an X by the BBFC in February 1973 and by the spring, protests against the film were in full swing and would escalate to include a privately funded legal action against the distributors of film.³³

In their unsolicited communiqué about the film, the Festival of Light declared:

'There is reason to believe that a number of films given an X certificate by the BBFC are manifestly illegal at common law and a number of people in different parts of the country have been writing to us for advice concerning civil action.'³⁴

They also included printed extracts from the film's script to support their position that the film was obscene. In Belfast the police committee were firm in rebutting the overtures from the pressure group stating unequivocally:

'The committee are aware of the content of the film and I think it probable, in view of the considerable public controversy that it has caused, that should the application be made to screen the film, the committee would wish to view it before it shown publicly within the city'³⁵

It also clarified its own process observing, 'the council view films which have not received a certificate from the BBFC or about which there is public controversy [...] the number of films viewed in recent years has been very small.'³⁶

Unfortunately for the police committee, this reasoned response was frustrated by the Festival of Light shifting tactics. The same information about the illegality of the film and the extracts from the script were sent to local youth, religious and political organisations. By August there was an avalanche of letters from across the city and region with objections to the film from the YMCA, the Ulster Headmaster's Association, the Baptist Union of Ireland, the Presbyterian Church of Ireland, as well as from concerned parents and teachers who had been encouraged to write by church leaders.

While the film itself is not religious, the large number of religious groups objecting to the film indicates how the Festival of Light have exploited the perceived threat to public morality and it is this that has caught the attention of the religious groups. We can read this as part of the competing discourses of the 1970s; conservative attitudes to sex and religion colliding with the legacy of the more permissive 1960s.

As well as objections from religious groups, there was also vocal opposition from a University Professor, the Belfast Council of Social Welfare, a Consultant at the Royal Hospital, and the Assistant Governor of the Crumlin Road Jail. One letter observed that such a film would increase deviance in the young, another termed

it 'filthy', and another warned that screening the film would cause irreparable damage to the minds and lives of young people in the city.³⁷

While the extracts from the letters are remarkably similar and offer objections on the basis of the film's immorality, the majority of them refer to the extracts from the script as reasons for their protests, as well the importance of protecting the young. The circulation of the script extracts was here a crucial factor in encouraging grass roots protest. This would have been the only contact that people had with the film itself, for the film had not been exhibited in Northern Ireland and no application had been made for its exhibition within the city or the region. Reactions to the film were all drawn from para-textual material like the script extracts circulated by the Festival of Light.

To respond to all the letters of protest, an emergency meeting of the entire city council was called in early September 1973 and the film was booked for a special screening of the police committee on 12th September. The outcome was a forgone conclusion – the film would be denied an exhibition license in Belfast. In protest, the recently opened art house cinema - partly funded by the University – the Queen's Film Theatre decided to screen the film without a local exhibition licence and licensed itself as a cinema club in order to circumnavigate the local council decision. Using this local licensing loophole was again common practice in the 1970s, but was usually a mean by which private members clubs in London could show 'blue' films to its local clientele.

While the example of Belfast does indicate a local response that contrasts with the BBFC classification of the film, the protests against the film were orchestrated by an organisation with a national not a local agenda. The opposition to the film rests on the Festival of Light's successful tactics in encouraging local moral and religious groups to protest against the film based on its script and descriptions of its content.

Considering the extreme conservatism of Belfast in this period coupled with the massive religious and political schism in the city, opposition to *Last Tango in*

Paris was perhaps unsurprising. But how did the Festival of Light tactics play out elsewhere?

Evidence from the National Archives demonstrates that in the university city of Oxford opposition to the film was mobilised by the Festival of Light in a similar way but with wildly different outcomes. One of the groups who decided to act against the film comprised a lay preacher, a vicar and an associate minister for a Pentecostal church, as well as a Cathedral canon and an Archdeacon. This group decided to exert pressure on the city council by hand-delivering a letter of protest about the film along with extracts from the script to the home address of each member of Oxford city council. Rather rashly perhaps, this action was taken whether the council members were on the viewing committee or not. Our knowledge of this grass roots activism is due to the fact that two of the councillors who were delivered the material made formal complaints to the police about receiving obscene material.

Paradoxically, instead of the film being the obscene material, the extracts from the script that are being distributed themselves become the obscene material, and rather than the film's distributors or the BBFC being targeted for making the material available, attention is focused on the group who circulated the script extracts. The female councillor who reported the incident to the police made a formal statement in which she declared:

'On opening the letter and reading the contents I first of all felt feelings of absolute disgust and was very angry. It occurred to me that these persons who had delivered the letter were petitioning me to prevent members of the public from seeing the film *Last Tango in Paris*, on the grounds of obscenity and yet they considered it perfectly legitimate to send me this transcript in such a way that I had no choice but to read part of it.'³⁸

The second councillor felt:

'It seemed to me and it still seems to me that if these persons who sent this material believed that the extract from the film was obscene and

liable to corrupt and deprave and not fit for adults, they had no right to deliver the material to a household where it could easily have been opened by boys under 18.’³⁹

In their own police statement, the action group members explained:

‘We had read the press reports of the film and had also read an extract from the script of the film. Some of us have spoken to those who have seen the film itself. We are satisfied that the film contained much material which in our opinion was obscene. In order to persuade members of the council to make an informed judgement on the film, we thought it desirable that they should know the nature of the film and that there was strong public objection to the showing of the film.’⁴⁰

They defended their actions and claimed:

‘In our position we feel very concerned for numbers of people of all ages who might be corrupted by seeing the film, particularly those of school age who might not be legally entitled to admission, but who might gain admission because the age restriction is frequently not enforced or is difficult to enforce.’⁴¹

It also later emerged that this group had added the names of the Archdeacon and the Canon of St Peters to their letter of protest without the knowledge of either of these senior clerics. Furthermore in a police statement, when questioned about the extracts from the script, one of the members of the action group specifically stated that ‘those Festival of Light people got it from somewhere I suppose.’⁴²

Such inept local protest has all the makings of a farce and the case against the action group was thrown out by the DPP in June 1973 who declared it a ‘frivolous exercise.’⁴³ However, this material does indicate the council reactions to the moral pressure being exerted in relation to this specific film. Evidently the religious and moral anxieties which were mobilised to such effect in Belfast were

not present to the same extent in Oxford. Certainly the Festival of Light did not manage to orchestrate the same degree of local grass roots protest in Oxford as it did in Belfast or at least not with effective results. As already noted, Oxford had a record of liberal decisions on contentious films, and it is unlikely that *Last Tango in Paris* would have been banned from exhibition in the University city.

The final example which sheds new light on regionality and local censorship is drawn from the industrial city of Newport in South Wales. While more recently recognised as a University and Cathedral city, Newport in the 1970s was a town dominated by its heritage and its industries of shipbuilding and steelworking. Newport is part of the non-Welsh speaking part of the country; the 1971 census records the number of Welsh speakers as less than 2% of the city's population.⁴⁴ Previously a county borough, Newport became a non-metropolitan borough following the Local Government Act changes in 1974 and saw the area of the borough increase from 12,000 acres and a population of 108,000 to 45,103 acres and a population of 130,000.⁴⁵ In doing so the new borough council absorbed nearby Caerleon Urban District Council and much of Magor and St Mellons Rural District Council including 20 village communities.⁴⁶

Perhaps unsurprisingly, Newport council had been a Labour stronghold for many years, yet the response of this working-class, heavily industrial community to *Last Tango in Paris*, frustrates the notion of predictable notions of taste and culture in regional areas. The response to the film by the local council is not similar to either Oxford or Belfast, and instead reveals a council deeply resentful of outside influence and keen to assert their own regional and national independence.

An extensive memo, compiled by one of the borough Councillors, firmly rebuts the claims made by the Festival of Light in their letter and its accompanying script extracts, and puts forward both a careful reading of the film and a defence of it, for the specific purpose of enabling fellow councillors to make an informed decision in the interests of local people.

The four page document begins:

'It was certain that the documents on the film *Last Tango in Paris* produced by the Nationwide Festival of Light would have an explosive effect among local councillors. The explicit words and imagery of the extract selected by this 'anti-porn' group is outrageously offensive to the bulk of people whose literary and cinematic horizons are limited.'⁴⁷

It is clear here that the author of the document has received the script extracts circulated by the Festival of Light. He continues:

'It is questionable whether it is honest to thrust this transcript under the unsuspecting noses of local councillors without a word of explanation of the context from which it is torn. The mental condition of the character Paul in this scene is of a man in extremis. He is distraught with grief and overwhelmed and unbalanced by conflicting emotional strains.'⁴⁸

In an effort to counter the circulation of the script extracts and the accompanying negative reviews of the film, the councillor has compiled his own review extracts and circulated them to the rest of the council. He cites the positive French responses to the film from *Le Monde* and *France Soir* who labelled the film 'scandalous' but 'talented' and reviews from *The Times* and *Evening Standard* both of which praise the film and its insights. He also draws on comments made by various clergy, to support his assertion that 'the prevailing climate of opinion among clerica (sic) is a neutral one' and cites the National Council of Churches as stating; 'an exquisite film that explores the complex question of freedom, liberation and identities.'⁴⁹

Perhaps most interesting is the reflection's on the local with the councillor citing a review from the *South Wales Argus* penned by the only local critic to have seen the film which reads:

'I would argue gently but respectful that the film is remarkably good and reaches very high quality in the second half. One could not say more about

the Welsh Rugby XV than that, and no one is talking about banning them.⁵⁰

The councillor concludes by firmly declaring:

There is no hint that Tango is any less acceptable here than elsewhere. Councillors are not elected on a porn or anti-porn ticket and few desire, or feel competent to fulfil the role of censor in a consistent rational manner. Local censorship is a recipe for anarchy.'⁵¹

He suggests that:

'It is understandable that many will find the language and imagery of Bertolucci unacceptable - even outrageous. They will stay away from the film for no one now can be unaware of the contents of this much discussed film...for those who wish to share the experience of others who have found something admirable in the this film, it is hoped that local authorities will not deny them that right.'⁵²

What is interesting here is that this defence is offered by someone who has actually seen the film, and who is anxious to counter the material being circulated by the Festival of Light. The individual councillor emerges as someone with a strong local voice and a keen to desire to prevent the local council from making a swift decision based upon outside influences. Unlike in Oxford, where the councillors response was to confront the people motivated by the Festival to protest and to challenge the unthinking circulation of script extracts, here the local council are being asked by one of their own to make an informed local decision.

Conclusion

These three different snapshots offer an insight into the local censorship of this particular film in Britain and the variety of regional responses. All of these case studies indicate that we cannot view local censorship in a homogenized way, but rather that opposition to cinema varies at local level and that grass roots

activism produces radically different results depending on the location in question.

As GLC council member and head of the film viewing committee Enid Wistrich wrote in 1978:

‘The struggle over film censorship is thus a reflection of the most agonizing conflicts concerning both the individual and our society. In deciding whether to censor, how to censor and above all what to censor, we are saying more about the mores and the workings of our society than we may care to admit.’⁵³

While Wistrich was writing about individuals and society, we can apply her notions of ‘society’ at micro level and perhaps see each local area with its own local viewing committee as a heavily individual and perhaps idiosyncratic local society or community with its own moral code and prevailing social and political concerns. Thinking in this way suggests that concerns over content, public morals and the act of censorship when applied to film is heavily localized and needs to be understood through a distinctly local framework which foregrounds the local rather than seeks purely to define it as a location.

Contrary to other work which has framed the local debate in opposition to the BBFC, in these examples independence from the decisions of the BBFC is not the issue. Rather local authorities are making a decision on an art house film for their own local community but being subject to heavily orchestrated pressure from an outside action group with a national not local agenda. The examples explored here of very different responses to pressure group activity and the mobilizing of grass roots action against *Last Tango in Paris* highlights how local film classification can only be understood as part of a bigger picture of local discourse.

While the evidence from Belfast indicates how local existing socio-political circumstances were skillfully manipulated by external pressure groups, it also reveals how local authorities respond to challenges to their authority brought by

their own communities. It is evident that the robust defence mounted by Oxford city councilors was not an option in Belfast and the council and the police committee in particular clearly considered that prudence was best in the face of such local opposition. In Belfast, the context is political, but online the councils in Southend or Leeds, the context here is not necessarily *party* politics but rather a religious and political schism which is influencing cultural and social responses to film and cinema.

The evidence from Newport reveals how an individual councilor resented the unsolicited interference from the Nationwide Festival of Light that he was moved to defend the film and its merits and urge the rest of the viewing committee not to act against it, but rather to make an informed decision on behalf of local people. It is also telling that he urges this course of action upon his fellow councilors as a way to indicate that Newport council will not be dictated to by outside forces and also to challenge any existing views of the city (and South Wales as a region) as parochial and small minded and culturally out of step with other urban centres.

As well as demonstrating the usefulness and importance of local material to explorations of the censorship debate, this work has also illustrated how both the local *and* the national are of crucial importance to explorations of local film censorship and are inextricably linked. It is only by a careful examination of the local and the national, as well as an evaluation of context, that a better understanding of local censorship policy can be achieved.

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Contact details:

Notes

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- ¹¹ Cynthia Cockburn, *The Local State* (London: Pluto Press Ltd, 1977), p. 14.
- ¹² *Ibid.* p. 13.
- ¹³ Arthur Marwick, *British Society since 1945* 2nd Edition. (London: Penguin, 1990), p. 187
- ¹⁴ James Robertson, *The Hidden Cinema: British Film Censorship in Action 1913-1972* (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 153.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁶ TNA file, HO 300/130, file report on visit of Stephen Murphy on Friday 18 May 1973. Report dated 21 May 1973.
- ¹⁷ Kate Egan's work on *Life of Brian* reveals that in some locations, the rejection of the BBFC's classification of the film and the refusal of the distributors to allow for an amended classification resulted in an outright ban.
- ¹⁸ Information on licensing from BBFC website:
<http://www.bbfc.co.uk/education-resources/student-guide/legislation/film-licensing> accessed 6 July 2015
- ¹⁹ BBFC guidelines accessed:
http://www.bbfc.co.uk/sites/default/files/attachments/BBFC%20Classification%20Guidelines%202014_6.pdf on 2 June 2015
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*
- ²¹ For more information on these two films see Sian Barber *Censoring the 1970s: The BBFC and the Decade that Taste Forgot* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2011), pp. 22-26.

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- ²² Enid Wistrich, *'I don't mind the sex, it's the violence: Film Censorship Explored* (London: Marion Boyars, 1978) pp. 13-14
- ²³ Peter Lloyd, *Not for Publication* (London: Bow Publishing, 1968), p. 24.
- ²⁴ Minutes of Fire Services and Public Control Committee meetings 1971-1974, CCM1/54 and CCM1/55, Portsmouth City Archives.
- ²⁵ TNA HO 300/166, memo dated 14 January 1975.
- ²⁶ James Robertson, *The Hidden Cinema: British Film Censorship in Action 1913-1972* (London: Routledge, 1993), p150-151.
- ²⁷ *Ibid*, p. 150.
- ²⁸ For a discussion of the different treatment of high and low quality films by the BBFC see Sian Barber *'Blue is the pervading shade: Re-examining British Film Censorship in the 1970s'* *Journal of British Cinema and Television*, 6.3 (2009) 349-369.
- ²⁹ Public Records Office of Northern Ireland (PRONI) File LA/7/3/R/19/26 letter from fourth year Science student, dated 1969.
- ³⁰ (PRONI) File LA/7/3/R/19/26 letter from Ards Literary Society undated.
- ³¹ (PRONI) File LA/7/3/R/19/26 letters from Eastside Church of Christ, Upper Newtonards Road and Cregagh Methodist Church. Undated.
- ³² (PRONI) File LA/7/3/R/19/26 Undated letter, stamped received 24 September 1969.
- ³³ This case is covered in Robertson but there is also additional information in TNA file HO 300/170.
- ³⁴ (PRONI) File LA/7/3/R/19/26 Festival of Light mailout dated 25 May 1973.
- ³⁵ (PRONI) File LA/7/3/R/19/26 Belfast viewing committee to festival of Light dated 19 July 1973.
- ³⁶ *Ibid*.
- ³⁷ (PRONI) File LA/7/3/R/19/26.
- ³⁸ TNA DPP/2/5296 Thames valley police statement from city councillor dated 29 May 1973.
- ³⁹ TNA DPP/2/5296 Thames Valley police statement from city councillor dated 29 May 1973.
- ⁴⁰ TNA DPP/2/5296 Thames Valley police statement from action group dated 29 May 1973.
- ⁴¹ *Ibid*.
- ⁴² *Ibid*.
- ⁴³ DPP H/O 1 file note of 9 June 1973
- ⁴⁴ Newport timeline <http://www.newportpast.com/hd/chronology.htm> accessed on 6 July 2015
- ⁴⁵ *Ibid*.
- ⁴⁶ *Ibid*.
- ⁴⁷ BBFC file for *Last Tango in Paris*, undated memo written by Newport Councillor.
- ⁴⁸ *Ibid*.
- ⁴⁹ *Ibid*.
- ⁵⁰ *Ibid*.
- ⁵¹ *Ibid*.
- ⁵² *Ibid*.
- ⁵³ Enid Wistrich, *'I don't mind the sex, it's the violence: Film Censorship Explored* (London: Marion Boyars, 1978), p. 12.

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